

# **NIGHT TRAIN**

**D.A. MADIGAN**

**A Bentley Western Horror Novel**

**April 12 1877**

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**Provo, Utah**

1.

It was hot, which was normal for the place and time, but it was also humid, which was not. The damp air came from the steam and the steam came from the smokestacks of the various engines moving ponderously about the railyard. The hot wet feel of it, along with the sulfur smell of the burning coal, made the small crowd lining the platform restless, and even sweatier than usual.

The Mormons did their best to look imperturbable in their dark, formal looking walking out clothes, but the beaded moisture on their foreheads made it all for nothing. They mostly self-segregated into two lots – the ‘bullioners’, who had made their money investing in gold, and the mercantilians, whose forebears had come in selling all sorts of useful goods – the Claggett brood, for example, standing like wilted roses in an untinted daguerreotype, whose great grandfather Morgan had made his pile in India ink and various dyes.

The mountain men’s sweat cut rivulets through the dirt that layered every bit of their exposed skin; their unkempt hair and whiskers jumping with lice and larger insect life. The unwashed reek of them, made the other whites in the crowd grant them a wide berth. But if you could have borne the stink long enough to pick up one of those old fellers and shake ‘em by the ankles, Lord only knows how much in gold dust might have fallen out on to the boards. That was the problem, though – the gold in Utah, especially in the mountains, is plentiful, but it is all found in the form of tiny flakes very difficult to mine and gather. In another few years these miners would move on to the Yukon, where the gold came mainly in fist sized nuggets..

The hot steam in the air made the soldier boys in their perspiration-darkened blue cotton uniforms short tempered, although at least the three stationed atop the heavily steel reinforced cage car could catch a bit of a breeze now and then. The three prisoners within the box had no such good fortune. Of those three, only John Robert Dire seemed unbothered by the oppressive climate. Ghost Knife Weasel and Wendell Bird had already sweat through their black and white striped prison garb. Although the two were both Indians, Ghost Knife was a Ute and Bird a Navajo; neither tribe were brothers at that time, so they didn't speak to each other. And neither of them had anything to say to the white Dire.

Ghost Knife had led his gang of full and half breeds and even a few niggers and renegade whites through town after town out in the desert, robbing and raping and killing, and Bird had been caught in bed with a married white lady, and those were low and loathsome crimes, but Dire had killed whole families – not just the men, but the women and children, too. Sacrificed them in some vile, nefarious, Luciferean rituals, torturing them horribly and then disfiguring their corpses in the midst of strange, arcane, diabolic symbols. And although the complete facts had not been released to the general public and the newspapers of that time were too decorous to publish them anyway, he had performed sex acts on all his victims as well.

Posthumous examinations made this certain. Dire had assaulted not just the women, but the men and the children as well. His depredations and lack of even the most basic shreds of morality or remorse were chilling; one of his jailers, Kenneth Kennesaw, swore to a reporter from the Provo *Gazette* that when you looked in Dire’s eyes you could see the red glints of hellfire.

The two Injuns had little in common and no real respect for each other, but if they could have gotten loose from their chains they would have unhesitatingly murdered Dire where he sat. A man of such bad medicine could not be allowed to linger in the living world a second longer than it took to dispatch him; his toxic aura would infect those nearby. Neither of the two were *sachem* – medicine men – but even with their hair shorn close to their skulls by prison barbers, they could feel the darkness radiating from Dire.

Now Dire hunched forward a little on the bench where he was chained alone, his burning black eyes dancing from one redskin to another. They were chained on the bench across from him. There were iron bars set in a line a foot in front of Dire, running floor to ceiling, and another line of similar bars set

12 inches in front of the two Indians feet, leaving a passage barely 42" wide down the center of the reinforced prison car. But Dire's fiery eyes seemed to pierce all barriers regardless. The two Indians felt like he was six inches away, staring directly into their faces.

Dire smiled. "Hot, ain't it?"

Wendell Bird turned his eyes away; to stare into the eyes of a *manitou* was foolish. He had dirtied his flesh and his soul with Deuteronia Markham Marshal and he would live with that until the white men hung him, and then in the Nightlands the elder women of his ghost tribe would claw his spirit flesh and pop out his spirit eyes. But for now at least he still had his soul within him and he preferred to keep it as long as he could. He would not allow a vile thing like Dire to hook his soul out of his body with its eyes.

Ghost Knife Weasel returned Dire's stare calmly, completely unafraid. He had long ago stopped troubling himself with the lies of shamans, red and white. He would kill Dire if he got a chance, though. The creature's evil required no less an action from any decent man.

But he wouldn't speak to him. Instead, he spat, jerking his head forward as he did it to get better distance. His spittle flew straight between both sets of bars and landed on the riveted steel floor between Dire's feet.

Dire threw his head back and laughed.

2.

Outside, there were work gangs everywhere, usually 8-man teams, stripped to the waist and gleaming in the indifferently cruel morning sun. Some of them were carrying on their shoulders heavy sections of temporary track to briefly connect one line to another, a foreman chanting 'HEEEEEEEY boys, one two, HEEEEEEYYYYY boys, three four' as they heaved them up off the pile by the big sheet metal warehouse and then eased them back down again where they needed to go. The muscle teams were mostly Goshute, with a few burly Negroes tossed in for spice. When the curved connector sections were slammed down onto the hard packed sand where they needed to be, other, more deft 'tacker' teams swarmed in. Mostly Chinese, these quicker moving fellas moved in with canvas satchels full of temporary wooden spikes and big 4 pound hand-sledges to spike the connector arcs into place.

Other 8-man muscle teams were hauling empty cars from over in the 'idle' section towards the big chuffing engine that waited there by the platform. The iron wheels on the iron rails made a constant screeching rumble. The pay was a dollar a day for members of the muscle team, 75 cents a day for the Chinese tackers. That was considered to be fine wages for a working man, in that time and place.

Union Pacific #119 had seen better days. Eight years before, it had taken part in the notorious "Golden Spike" ceremony celebrating the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States of America. It is still said that at least one of the millionaire railroad magnates in attendance at that ceremony had rushed to be there, having just changed to a fresh shirt and washed the blood off his hands from murdering an enraged farmer whose land the railroads had taken through eminent domain. That may or may not be true, but regardless, #119 had seen its fair share of murder and mayhem -- in January of 1869, its front 'pilot' (more colloquially known as a 'cowcatcher') had been dripping red and steaming hot with blood after it had plowed through a dozen or so Skull Valley Goshutes unable to get off the tracks through an exceptionally narrow pass in the Uinta Mountains. Although of course the law at that time did not classify such a thing as 'murder' and the engineer, Donald M. Baldwin of Salt Lake City, did not trouble to report the incident, just as he had not considered for even a fleeting moment trying to brake the train when he saw the goddamned heathens walking the tracks through the narrow defile half a mile before reaching them. The track was on an uphill grade there; had he braked and waited long enough for the Injuns to clear the pass, by the time he got steam up again he'd have been two hours late getting in to Standardville, and the Company would have taken that out of his hide and his pay packet. Ramming straight through the guts of 12 or 15 Injuns or losing a day's pay? That was an easy choice to make. In that time and place.

By April of '77, #119, a product of the Rogers Locomotive and Machine Works, was visibly battered and overdue for a refit and a new coat of polish, at the very least. However, it was one of the closest steam powered locomotives to Provo when Governor Emery had needed to put together a train to transport the mass murderers John Robert Dire and Ghost Knife Weasel across country to Washington D.C. for public execution. Although it was notorious Pinkerton James McParland who had brought Dire in, and Thomas Tate Tobin who tracked down and captured the Weasel, President Rutherford felt a public Federal execution on or near the front lawn of the White House was just the thing to shore up a shaky start to his first term in office. So a train was hastily assembled, and the swells of Provo who had bought tickets for a local double hanging began to demand their refunds.

(Wendell Bird had been dragged from the bed of Samuel Simon Marshal three days before this and the mob would have hung him if there hadn't been a Federal Marshal there to intervene. Instead of a lynching noose Bird had gotten a summary trial with the Marshal standing as judge, and then been transported, chained up, on horseback all the way here by that same Marshal, to add a third set of cheap paper slippers on the gallows in front of the Provo Courthouse. That Marshal, Matthew Marcus Liskenberry, was not going to see Bird hung in a rural town without the wherewithal to pay a bounty when he could get eight dollars and twenty five cents turning a gallows bird in for execution in a big Federal city. So Mathew Marcus Liskenberry had ridden hard to get Bird to Provo in time for the widely advertised public hanging – and then, of course, divine intervention, in the form of a Presidential Executive Order, had happened.)

And so Engine #119 sat, gently steaming, on the main track at Provo Station, waiting for its train of prisoners and their attendants to be assembled behind it.

3.

The governor's man, Jimmy McCracken, hawked and spat from the platform onto the nearer of the two train tracks running in front of it. "Ghost Knife Weasel is a mean sonofabitch," he noted to Federal Marshal Liskenberry, standing next to him. "But that Dire's a truly evil bastard, and crafty with it. You and your boys best keep both eyes well peeled, me lad."

Liskenberry didn't even look at the dandified McCracken. "I'm not your lad," he said. He wanted to spit as well, but didn't want to seem as if he were imitating this lace-cravat dude at anything. "They seem slow hitching the cars up. Maybe you should get after that, you bein' so such a gent of influence and what not."

McCracken was a rising star in the Utah territorial government and had an eye on a Federal position, hopefully within another two years at the most. He didn't like the 'wild, wild West', as the newspapers called it -- too much dust, and all the whores had diseases, even the younger ones -- but it was here that the opportunities were, if you hadn't been born with New York City social connections. He'd be glad to see the back of these miserable dirt-hats and head back east to civilization when his ship finally came in. He knew his pressed trousers, polished patent leather shoes, chesterfield coat and top hat set him apart here, but he was a gentleman and would not coarsen himself to suit the local rigor. The pomade he wore in his closely trimmed hair and whiskers also drew derisive snickers. Well, let the mugs guffaw. His current position paid \$1,250 gold Union dollars annually and he got paid twice a week, not monthly like a common cavalryman. When Governor Emery went east to take up a Congressman's position in a year or two, McCracken would go along as his Chief of Staff, and \$2500 a year would not be an audacious expectation for such a post. Meanwhile, this gib-faced fozler would still be living off his measly eight dollar and twenty five cent bounties.

Liskenberry was tired and saddlesore. He'd managed to get six hours of sleep on some shit smeared stable straw after he'd turned Bird in at the courthouse for hanging, but once he'd awakened to the news of the President's demands, he'd been walking fast and talking faster every minute. The clerk of the court had wanted the \$8.25 bounty back and Liskenberry had insisted, in that case, that he needed to go along with Bird to collect that bounty in Washington D.C. The clerk had then declared, well, in that

case, sir, you just take command of the security detail we're sendin' and accompany *all* the noose fodder. Liskenberry hated taking responsibility for more than himself and one, maybe two bounties at a time – that was why he'd put in for the Marshals in the first place. But if he wanted to turn a profit out of this whole thing, it seemed he had no choice.

So now, having put McCracken in his place, he started to pace along the platform, eyes moving from one spot to another, seeking out the various places where he had stationed the men for this detail. Two men on the small, railed iron veranda at the back of the cage-car. Three more on the roof. The sixth stationed at the front of the cage-car. Blue suited soldiers, all of them, provided by Fort Cameron -- let Hayes pay for the security detail, since he was the one who wanted to buff his image with two lengths of hemp. One good thing about it; now that the Executive had stepped in the rate for seeing Dire and the savage safely to Union Station was \$50 each, and Liskenberry wasn't dividing it up amongst any of his fellow Marshals. He figured he could get at least another ten for Bird; who didn't like to watch an Injun kick at the end of a rope? Liskenberry stroked his walrus mustache and stamped his feet in his punctiliously well preserved barracks shoes as he walked.

At the edge of his vision he saw a dust plume etching a line along the edge of the eastern horizon. He grunted. More goddam gallows birds, here to see the condemned men off. He wished he could charge them admission, or at the very least, sell them flavored ices.

It was only when the first empty railroad car came clattering and screeching up, to be hauled to a halt just behind the prison car, that Liskenberry smelled the rat hiding in the woodpile. He jumped down from the platform, his knees bending to absorb the impact of the six foot drop, and ran towards the foreman of the crew that had muscled the car into place. "This is a one car train, a one car train," he shouted, "you've made a mistake, you flibberdigibbet, all that goes on the back of that car is a caboose. Get that thing out of there!"

"Ah ah ah," he heard McCracken's sniggering voice behind him. "That's a private Pullman car there, boyo, made especially for Territorial Councilor Till, who was looking forward to taking his new wife and baby boy to the public hangings, so the Governor authorized him to go watch 'em in Washington."

More empty cars were being trundled up even as they spoke, and Liskenberry saw the way of it. This was Emory's revenge for losing the spectacle of the executions to the Federal. A prison car and a caboose would have hardly slowed #119 at all; the long trip to D.C. could have been done in 12 hours, piling on the coal. But hauling a train of goods and gawkers... and it wasn't just the added mass. Wealthy passengers would want a dining car, a dining car would need a freight car all its own to carry supplies. And additional water, for drinking and washing in, and that was heavy.

Liskenberry turned to McCracken, knowing what he'd see, looking up at the man standing above him now on the platform. Yep, there it was... a big gloating leer of triumph. Liskenberry shouted "You'll need to put the cage-car at the end o' the train, then! I don't want no crew nor such passin' through it on their way to some fancy party!"

McCracken scowled, but that was reasonable. The engineer and fireman would need to be able to leave the engine from time to time, on a longer journey. It would be a breach of security to let them pass through the cage-car. He turned his head and started yelling instructions.

Liskenberry's face was thunderous. This was not startin' out well. Not at all.

And then the line of dust that he had first seen on the far horizon drew close enough to make out details, and the Marshal groaned out loud.

It was a tumbleweed wagon – the sort of heavily reinforced coach used to transport prisoners all over the frontier. Dire and Ghost Knife Weasel had already been in the basement jail at the county courthouse and Liskenberry had brought Bird in himself, so no such coach had been needed, but now one was pulling up in a cloud of dust, sure enough. And... sonofabitch! There was another wheeled hoosegow riding in the wake of the first. Both pulled by four mule teams, shod hooves thundering and throwing sparks, their teamsters' whips 'popping corn' over their heads. For a moment Liskenberry let himself hope that the authorities at Sugar House State Prison had loaned the tumbleweed wagons out to

hobnobbers come to watch the train depart. But that hope was dashed when he got a glimpse inside through the barred windows. He could see both were packed full of men in the white and black striped garb of state prisoners. Apparently, the Warden had decided to relieve overcrowding by sending his worst offenders off to Washington, along with Dire and Weasel.

“Ah haw haw haw!” Liskenberry heard McCracken guffawing from above. “The look on your fizz! You know the best part of the joke, Marshal? It’s all your idea! Doggins wired Sugar House looking for instructions on your prisoner and the ol’ Gaffel thought your idea of bonus prisoners was a real humdinger! Haw haw haw!”

Liskenberry wished Doggins, the courthouse clerk, and Gaffel, the Chief Warden at Sugar House prison, a quick and unceremonious journey to Hell, preferably while riding double on McCracken’s hee hawing spine. Or humping him, fore and aft, like they was pumping along on a handcar. Although McCracken would probably like that just fine.

A few minutes later, a sour Liskenberry was thumbing through a sheaf of official looking documents liberally festooned with stamps, signatures, and in a few places, actual red ribbons of authority. One page listed nineteen names, in addition to Bird, Dire and Weasel – ‘terrible men convicted of capital crimes of a heinous nature’. The papers stated they were all officially transferred to the Old Capitol Federal Penitentiary as of two days ago, and under ‘other instructions’, a clear, firm hand had imprinted: **HANG THEM ALL.**

Liskenberry shook his head. This was shaping into a nine- or ten-day journey, once you added in all the freight he’d need to feed twenty two prisoners, himself, and six blue suits for the journey. Then his eyes brightened – Dire and Weasel were worth \$50 dollars each; these other, less notorious scummers should fetch at least... hrm... \$10 a head? Seemed reasonable. Nearly another \$200 And if he only gave them one meal a day they’d be mostly too weak to give anyone trouble. Although that could backfire; if there was a blockage on a line, the worthless refuse would become temporarily useful as buck labor, which the railroad could be charged \$5 per day per head for... but not if they weren’t fed well...

Eyes full of mathematical calculations and abstract formulae squaring off minimum risk and expense versus maximum potential usefulness, Liskenberry walked towards the engine, to check up on the fitness of the engineer and the fireman. For maximum speed they’d need at least three of each; he might need to wire the railroad’s corporate headquarters in Salt Lake City to get additional personnel. And then they’d need an additional sleeping car for the extra crew, god dammit... Hell, for a nine or ten day journey he’d need one for himself and his detachment as well. He was going to have to go and hire himself a dude college professor to calculate all the variables up.

Or...

Now there was a pip of an idea!

Grinning, Liskenberry clomped up the stairs to regain the platform and then ran for the Western Union office, to make prodigious use of the brand new Edison quadriplex rig just installed there two months prior.

4.

By the time the train was fully assembled it held thirteen cars – the original reinforced cage-car had been joined by three luxurious passenger cars with sleeping berths, a dining car, a supplies car, two bunk cars far less luxurious than the three well equipped passenger cars, two tank cars containing fresh water, an extra car containing nothing but wood and coal, and three shipping cars containing various goods that politically favored Utah merchants had managed to wheedle on to the train.

Native American superstition does not hold the number 13 in dread the way European culture does, so neither Ghost Knife Weasel nor Wendell Bird was overly concerned with the number of cars on the train, although once that figure was finalized, they could not help but overhear the soldiers in their

guard detail fretting about it. John Robert Dire seemed pleased about it. “It’s always been a lucky number for me, boys,” he said, leaning back against the wall behind him as best he could while restrained by wrist and ankle fetters bolted to his bench.

Wendell Bird, who had seen many trains from afar when his tribe was being force marched further west by the Federal government a decade earlier, grunted. “It won’t be thirteen cars, fool. They’ll put a caboose on the end.”

Dire didn’t reply to that. He had closed his eyes and looked as relaxed as a man shackled to a bench on his way to his own hanging possibly could.

Ghost Knife Weasel had spent his time since being placed in this cell on wheels examining his surroundings. There was no door in the wall of bars in front of the bench he and Bird were chained to, just as there was no door in the bars in front of Dire. He had overheard the soldiers when he had first arrived; they had expected a fast transit, no more than twenty four hours. For such a journey no doors would be necessary; prisoners need not even be fed nor watered for a short period like that. But now, with the addition of many more cars full of supplies and gawkers, the engine must travel more slowly. The prisoners might not need to be released from their cells but food, drink, and chamber pots would need to be passed in and dishes, trays, and filled chamber pots passed out again. Certainly this was all possible. But how were the prisoners to be removed at the end of the journey?

Ghost Knife Weasel remembered that when he, Bird, and Dire had first been conducted into the car, there had been no bars in place. The soldiers had run their shackles through iron rings set into the benches and then padlocked them into place. And then, with a low rumble, the bars had lowered into place out of the roof of the car. Ghost Knife Weasel was familiar with the complex mechanical contraptions of the white man. He had seen no grates of bars sticking up from the roof of this car when they had been approaching, so the grates must somehow lie down on the roof, on top of each other, until they were needed. A little muscle power would stand the bars up and then lower them down through pre-drilled holes. And then, even if the prisoners somehow got out of their shackles, they were still trapped. Doubly trapped, behind bars, and then behind the iron reinforced walls of the train car itself.

Ghost Knife Weasel wondered how strong the roof and floor of this car was.

At either end of the prison car huge iron doors were hung, like the forbidding portals to a bank vault. In the middle of each was a large iron wheel. Now, with a creaking rumble, one of those wheels began to turn. It rolled through 180 degrees and stopped with a metallic slamming sound, and then the door swung massively inward, clanging to a stop against the sturdy bars on Dire’s side of the car. Two figures were silhouetted against the bright sunlight outside. One stepped through the door, then the other.

“Don’t it stink in here,” McCracken marveled. “How do these boys get any air in here at all? Hayes will be very put out if these fellows don’t survive the trip to be hung.”

Liskenberry pointed up to the ceiling. “They’s vents up there. I’ll have the boys open ‘em. Didn’t think it was necessary for a 24 hour trip, which was all this was supposed to be.”

“Yes, well, nothing is as it was supposed to be,” McCracken snarled, his tone venomous. “I know it was you, Marshal, who suggested to the governor that I accompany the prisoners and oversee the entire expedition.”

“Somebody good at organizin’ and math had to do it,” Liskenberry said. “Once all them new passengers and train cars and goods and what not got added in to the mix it was all over my head.”

“Yes, well,” McCracken said, “I’ll see that everything goes smoothly. You just keep the prisoners well locked down.”

“Oh, everything will go very smoothly,” a new voice interjected. The voice was cordial, even friendly, smooth as glass and well elocuted. One could almost hear a sort of rich, derisive glee in it, dancing just below the surface of the sound. “You have my word on it.”

The Marshal and the chief of staff both turned their heads to stare at John Robert Dire.



“Zat a fact,” Liskenberry said, his voice soft.

“Oh yes,” Dire affirmed, his eyes flickering like fire in a stove, back there in the gloom. The center of the special car was brightly lit by a swatch of golden sunlight coming in through the open door but the iron barred sections on either side were dark.

“Oh yes,” Dire repeated with a liquid chuckle. “I guarantee it. Because every single person on this train is going to die.”

Liskenberry pulled the heavy iron door shut with a slam and turned the iron locking ring until it thudded to a stop. He glanced over at the blue suited soldier, standing in the corner of the tiny metal platform. His face was pallid underneath a jeweled coating of sweat.

“Don’t take any mind of what that maniac said,” the Marshal growled, “and don’t spread it around none, neither. He’s chained up and behind bars. He’s just trying to spook folks.”

“Yessir,” the soldier said, drawing himself up with an obvious effort and saluting smartly.

Liskenberry returned the salute and then said “Get up top and help ‘em get those vents open. It is pretty rank inside; don’t want those ol’ boys choking to death on they own nasty smell.”

The soldier said “YESSIR” more loudly and crisply, slung his rifle on his back, and climbed the metal ladder fixed to the outer wall of the car. After he pulled himself up onto the roof, Liskenberry and McCracken could hear him passing along the Marshal’s orders, and then the creaking sounds of metal cranks turning.

“Who has keys to those shackles,” McCracken said, abruptly.

Liskenberry laughed. “Nobody. They ain’t made that way. *WE* ain't takin' no chances with these ol' boys. We got a hammer and chisel in a tool chest in one of the bunkrooms. We'll knock the padlocks off when we get to Washington. The bars can't be pulled up from the inside. Them bad asses might be mean and evil as hell, but they ain't goin' nowhere and they ain't goin' to cause no trouble.”

McCracken scowled. He turned and stepped to the next car, which held the other 19 condemned prisoners. No bars here, just wooden benches on either side of the car and 9 men to one side, 10 to the other, wrists manacled behind them, the chains of those manacles hung on hooks screwed into the sides of the car. No one expected any of these hard cases to make any kind of miraculous escape either.

Bird really should be in here with these lesser offenders, Liskenberry mused to himself. He might have raped him a married white lady, but he wasn't in Ghost Knife Weasel's or John Robert Dire's league for pure evil. But it would have been more trouble than it was worth, hauling those bars back up and knocking his shackles off just to transfer him.

“When we eat, boss,” one of the men said in an ingratiating whine as McCracken opened the door and walked in. He was a mulatto man, his coffee colored skin swirled along one arm like a whorl of cream that has just been stirred in to the brew. Delroy Jenkins was his name; he had killed a foreman on the sheep ranch he worked at and stolen a horse to escape on. His ignorance of desert survival had spelled failure for him and death for the horse. In Nevada it had been a toss-up which crime was considered more grievous.

“You eat when I say you do,” McCracken replied coldly. He walked on down the car and out through the door at the far end, which led to the first of the two bunk cars. Beyond the bunk cars were the three freight wagons full of mercantile goods, beyond them was the supply car for the diner and then the dining car itself, and beyond the diner were the three very comfortable coaches holding the swells who were traveling to Washington to see the execution.

Liskenberry paused a moment. “I’ll see you boys get fed once we’re underway,” he said. “Be another hour, maybe less.”

“Need to piss, boss,” another man, this one a hulking white with a sweat-beaded, almost completely hairless head and eyes that were impossible to see beneath a sloping shelf of heavy brow.

Liskenberry sighed. Policing prisoners was one of the worst parts of his job. He stepped back out. The bluecoat had returned to his post. “Comber needs to piss. Be careful with him.”

“We need more guards for this detail,” the bluecoat, whose name was Redfern, grumbled. He hated this part of it; you either took the manacles off so they could hold and point their own workings, with all the risks that entailed, or you had to hold their nasty business yourself for them, and half the time they’d get hard ons and coo about your sweet, soft hands.

“Just get it done,” Liskenberry said. He knew he could make his six soldiers a lot happier by telling them he’d split the bonus money with them once they had successfully delivered these reprobates, but he was god damned if he was going to do that. He was in command and this detail would do what they were told or they’d wear a metal gaff for a hat here on this train and then join the rest of the riff raff on the gallows in Washington for insubordination.

Comber didn’t say anything or move at all when the bluesuited kid reached behind him to unhook his wrist manacles. Scaring the fish first thing wasn’t how you did this. You lulled them. You let them get in the habit of thinking you were harmless. Then they let their guard down and made mistakes.

He stood up, six foot five, two hundred eighty pounds, all of it muscle. His hair had started to thin and recede when he was 15. Now, at 33, all there was left was a greying band that ran around the back of his head, beneath the bulge of his skull, from ear to ear. He shaved it when he could, but that was impossible while manacled, so he had a light grey fuzz coming in.

“You wanna grab my sausage go ahead,” Comber said in his piping child’s voice, “but I promise not to do nothin’ if you lemme hold it myself.”

And he wouldn’t, not this time. But he’d need to piss every day, and this train wasn’t gonna get to Washington D.C. real soon. He’d get a chance. And this here bluesuit was a cutie pie, too... probably lied about his age after he run off from some farm where his paw was puttin it to him regular. Probably got his little arse pumped by every other swingin’ dick in his platoon, he was so cute. Comber made an effort not to lick his lips.

“Go ahead and uncuff him for a minute,” Liskenberry said. His horse pistol was out and leveled. Redfern nodded in relief and used a key to uncuff the huge prisoner. Who behaved himself, meek as a little lamb, pissing onto the gravel between the tracks through the hole in the floor.

“You men don’t cause trouble, maybe tomorrow I’ll let you loose inside this car,” Liskenberry said. “The governor’s butt boy won’t like it but that’s just a little bonus for us all.” And if they were free in the car, which would otherwise be locked down, then they could shit and piss without help.

Of course, if he let ‘em free in the car, one or some of the little ones were gonna get fucked by the bigger ones, but that was life in lockdown. None a’these here boys were exactly model citizens. And they were all gonna die when they got where they were goin’. So a little sodomy wasn’t goin’ to make much difference to any of ‘em in the long run, because they didn’t have a long run.

Comber let the bluecoat relock his hands behind his back and then hook the chain back up when he sat down. He’d seen the key when the punk got it out. Standard gaoler cuff key; a stiff piece of wire or even a toothpick to move the tumblers would work in any lock it opened.

Comber sat and thought about things. He was pretty sure he could pry a long splinter off the wall behind him and then unlock one cuff.

After that, he was gonna fuck that bluejacket. He’d let all the other yardbirds in the car watch him do it, too. They’d enjoy that.

And after *that*, well, he’d just have to see.